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How To Study The Bible

BY K. H. TING

Tao Fong Shan Ecumenical Centre 1981

January, 1981

Translation of "Zeyang Du Shengjing", *Tian Feng*, No. 1 (October 20, 1980), pages 45-63. New Series. Published in Shanghai, *Tian Feng* is a joint publication of the China Christian Council and the National Committee of the Chinese Christian Three-Self Patriotic Movement.

English translation published by:

Tao Fong Shan Ecumenical Centre .
P.O. Box 33
Shatin, N.T.
Hong Kong.

Theology Library
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY
AT CLAREMONT
California

printed in Hong Kong

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Preface

K. H. Ting has written "How to Study the Bible" in order to introduce the Bible to new, younger Chinese Christians. He approaches Bible study from a devotional perspective in a variety of ways. From broad interpretations on the theme and system of the Bible, to probing discussions of specific passages of scripture and individual Biblical personalities. From questions of particular theological importance to the Chinese Church, to concern for the tiny voices and even the silences of the Bible. Ting's intention is not to lay down an authoritative standard or definitive method of Biblical interpretation, but to introduce and popularize Biblical study among a new generation of Chinese Christians in a way which allows the whole Bible to speak. He has done this with grace and wisdom.

In these pages we are presented with an inside perspective on the theological and Biblical dimensions of Chinese Christianity. As I read the manuscript for the first time, I continually found myself moving back and forth between the theological insights of an individual Christian and the social context of Christianity in New China, on the one hand, and the eternal message of the Bible on the other. The Bible, for K. H. Ting, can make a difference in our lives. But it must be approached in a way which is appropriate for Christians in their own particular context.

I was especially struck by the way in which Christians are challenged to change. By comparing Genesis and Revelation, for example, Ting shows how human beings can go from fearing God to welcoming Him. The Bible continually develops the relationship between God and humanity, and the changes which occur in this relationship. Change, or better, a changing relationship, is also discussed in terms of the Biblical progression from unity to division to unity which, for Ting, "is the clue to penetrating the meaning of the whole Bible." This theme is also explicit in his meditation on the story of Jacob and the parable of the prodigal son.

Change, for the Christian, is based upon our response to God in Christ. It does not come without suffering and struggle, and yet it offers up the

possibility of new life. We participate in change as we come to understand "God as a fellowship" who intends that we work with Him "voluntarily and without the least coercion" to form a community. K. H. Ting has offered an aperitif for further study and theological reflection. Yet I believe it may help all of us to better understand the Biblical message of humanization, as it has taken shape in the experience of Chinese Christians.

"How to Study the Bible" is not a detailed scholarly treatise on historical criticism, theological methodology or practical hermeneutics. Nor was it written for Western readers who already have hundreds of books on Bible study from which to choose. But for those who are able to read the Bible as "a letter written by the Father in Heaven to his children", this short pamphlet may afford us a better understanding of the significance of the Bible for the Chinese Church. At the same time, it can aid us in reflecting upon the importance of the Biblical message for our own lives and work.

We are most grateful to all the people who helped in the preparation of this pamphlet for publication. For their assistance in bearing a major part of the translation, editorial and typing work, special thanks are extended to Peter Barry, Deng Zhaoming, Christina Lai and Janice Wickeri.

All Biblical quotations are from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

Philip L. Wickeri
Tao Fong Shan

Advent, 1980

First of all, let us welcome young believers to come and study the Bible with us.

Chinese Christians are Bible-loving Christians and many are familiar with the Bible. The ten years of turmoil deprived many Christians of our right to read the Bible, but not only did we not forget the Bible during this time, we longed for it even more. A number of Christians copied large sections of the Bible into their notebooks, or kept them in their hearts, memorizing texts to repeat to others. Soon we will be able to get the Bible again, one which is printed on China's own paper. I believe that everyone will show even greater devotion in studying the Bible when it is available and, having accepted the instruction of the Bible, will put it into practice and experience its truth more deeply. Thus, we will be like the light and the salt of society, and thereby give beautiful witness to Christ.

Now let us discuss how we should study the Bible.

Let us be clear right from the beginning: the Bible is not a riddle; it is a letter written by the Father in heaven to his children. He wants us to understand it. He does not want us to grope blindly in the dark, nor to depend on this or that authoritative interpretation. He certainly does not want us to blindly accept any person's deliberately mystifying explanation of the Bible. Our heavenly Father has given us his word as a lamp for our feet and light on the road, to illumine our paths in the world.

Some Christians think that the Bible is difficult to understand, and they dare not read it or try to understand it by themselves. Actually, if we are willing to follow the lead of the Holy Spirit, we need not fear. Psalm 119: 130 says: "The unfolding of thy words gives light." God himself wants us to understand the Bible.

The Theme Of The Bible

Although there are sixty-six books in the Bible, there is only one theme: how God loves human creation and has prepared in Christ the way of our salvation. We should not depart from this theme in explaining any section of the Bible. If we abandon it, then the Bible cannot be explained.

The Bible begins by talking about God, and ends by speaking about humanity. Genesis 1:1 says: "In the beginning *God* created the heavens

and the earth." Revelation 22:21 says: "The grace of the Lord Jesus be with *all the saints*. Amen." From beginning to end, the whole Bible speaks of the relationship between God and humanity, and of the changes which occurred in this relationship.

Two important questions which God addressed to people who have sinned are recorded in the third and fourth chapters of Genesis: "Adam, where are you?" "Cain, where is Abel your brother?" When Adam sinned, his relationship to God was damaged and his relationship to his brother also.

Adam's first utterance to God in the Bible is: "I was afraid." (Gen. 3:10) After Adam sinned, he heard the sound of God, was afraid and hid himself.

The final human utterance to God in the Bible is: "Come, Lord Jesus." (Rev. 22:20) There is no longer cause to be afraid of God, nor to hide from God, whose presence means happiness.

It is a tremendous change to go from fearing God to welcoming him, from hiding from God to seeking his face. This change is the work of God. Through the Incarnation of the Son of God, Jesus Christ, his death on the Cross and his resurrection from the dead, we can enjoy this change. The entire Bible never departs from this work which God has accomplished for us, whether it speaks of the Incarnation, the good works of Christ on earth, his suffering, resurrection and ascension into heaven, or about the work of the Holy Spirit in the world and in the Church. The Old Testament ends with a "curse" (Mal. 4:6), and the New Testament ends on a note of "grace". (Rev. 22:21) This makes clear what God has done for humanity.

"To unite all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth," (Eph. 1:10) we can say that this is the direction in which the whole Bible is pointing. "One" is the briefest, and at the same time the fullest, character in Chinese. The Bible tells us that in God's eyes God and humanity should be one and in harmony. But this unity has been broken. Both the relationship between God and humanity, and that among people, lost their harmony. Afterwards, through the great sacrifice of Christ, this "oneness" of relationship has been restored. "For he is our peace, who made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law of commandments and ordinances; that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby bringing the hostility

to an end." (Eph. 2:14-16) This progression from unity to division, and from division to unity, is the clue to penetrating the meaning of the whole Bible.

The Bible helps us to know God as the Lord of creation. He creates all things out of nothing and good out of evil. God himself is a fellowship formed of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, a community which carries out the work of creation. Within the universe, God not only wanted to create the human being as an organism, he also wanted to make this being holy through education, redemption and the work of the Holy Spirit. And continuing the work of creation, he intends that the human race would at last voluntarily form a community. This community would then work along with God, with one mind and one heart, voluntarily, without the least coercion. This is the final goal of creation. The whole Bible tells us how God began his work of creation, how great were the difficulties in creating this new being, and how great were the contradictions and struggles between God's love and human sin. It also tells us how God himself carried out the work of education, how becoming flesh, God entered the world, and completed the work of salvation, showing Christ to be Lord of the world, Lord of history and Lord of the Church. The Bible tells us how this work of creation will finally reach completion in a new heaven and a new earth. At that time, all the limited but positive results achieved by human efforts and sacrifices throughout history, will not be thrown onto the scrap heap, but will be accepted, blessed, transfigured and brought to their completion and perfection. At that time, the little bit of truth which we see will give way and we will be able to gain insight into the whole truth.

The System Of The Bible

Some people think that the Bible is an unsystematic book whose contents are complicated and confusing. If we stand outside the gospel and look at the Bible, this criticism is perhaps true. But we who have accepted Jesus Christ feel that the Bible is quite a symmetrical and systematic book.

Everything in the Bible has Christ as its center, everything comes together around Christ and points towards him. The earliest and the latest parts of the Bible are separated by over a thousand years, but Christ is the key to all of it. Christ removes the contradictions in the Bible. Christ Jésus himself said: "You search the Scriptures, because you think that in

them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness to me." (Jn. 5:39)

In the opening section of the Bible we read: "In the Beginning God created the heavens and the earth." (Gen. 1:1) At the end of the Bible we read: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth." (Rev. 21:1)

Genesis tells us: "The waters that were gathered together He called Seas." (1:10) Revelation tells us: "and the sea was no more." (21:1)

Genesis tells us that "the darkness He called Night." (1:5) Revelation tells us: "and there shall be no night then." (21:25)

Genesis tells us: "And God made the two great lights, the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night." (1:16) Revelation tells us: "and the city has no need for sun or moon to shine upon it." (21:23)

Genesis tells us that God warned Adam: "for in the day that you eat of it you shall die." (2:17) Revelation tells us: "and death shall be no more." (21:4)

Genesis tells us that God once said to man: "I will greatly multiply your pain you will work hard all your life." (3:16-17) Revelation tells us that God will wipe away every tear from his eyes, " neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore." (21:4)

Genesis tells us that God once said: "cursed is the ground because of you." (3:17) Revelation tells us: "There shall no more be anything accursed." (22:3)

Originally the devil tempted Adam; afterwards the devil will be destroyed forever.

Originally humanity was thrown out from where the tree of life grew. Later we read: "the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month, and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations." (Rev. 22:2)

Thus, clearly there is a common thread going through the Bible from beginning to end. This Bible indeed has its own system. How does this come about? Through Christ.

If you take your Bible, both Old and New Testaments, and very carefully open it to the middle, you will find the Psalms, the words of praise. Placing words of praise in the middle of the Bible tells us that our responsibility while living in the world is to praise and honor God. Of course, this does not mean that we must sing the Psalms all the time. The most important thing is that in our conduct we are neither selfish nor prejudiced towards others, and that we whole-heartedly support and carry out work which is in consonance with the will of God. Such a life praises and glorifies God.

Someone has gone to the trouble to figure out that the exact center of the whole Bible is Psalm 118, verse 8. This verse of the Bible has ten characters, divided into two phrases of five characters each. The first phrase is: "It is better to take refuge in the Lord," and the second phrase is: "..... than to put confidence in man." The two verbs in this verse, "to take refuge in" and "to put confidence in" form the true meaning of the word "religion." What is a person's religion? Regardless of what is said, we must look at where refuge is sought. What in the last analysis is the basis of confidence?

And the central message of the Bible is Christ. The Bible wants us to take refuge in Christ, to put our confidence in Christ.

Knock, And The Door Will Be Opened For You

There are some things which everyone will pay attention to: wild wind and violent rain, landslides and falling rocks, earthquakes and raging fires. But not everyone gives heed to a tiny sound. For we can only hear it if we become quiet, pray, search and knock.

How are we able to hear the tiny sounds of the Bible? By asking questions. The questions are like door knockers. When we ask our questions, many seemingly very common Scriptural passages reveal a very uncommon message.

"The word became flesh." That was a very uncommon thing in our world. It happened only once in human history. But when the Incarnation took place, was it spectacular? Did it shake heaven and earth? Certainly not. "And this will be a sign for you. You will find a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger ." (Lk. 2:12) So we see that

Christ's outward appearance was of a most common kind. But in his very commonness is embodied something unexpectedly uncommon.

We should not suppose that any passage of Scripture contains nothing new for us just because of our over-familiarity with it. We must ask questions. The Bible is not afraid of our questions. People have raised countless questions regarding the Bible for many centuries, but the Bible has not been overturned by them. Ask questions, and the truth will become apparent. It's a shame that we are lazy in our thinking and would rather memorize the Bible than ask questions.

In the Gospels Jesus himself asked questions about the Old Testament many times. As soon as he asked, the hidden truth of the Scripture became apparent. (Cf. Mt. 12:3-5, 22:31-33, 41-45; Lk. 20:17; Jn. 10:34-36)

Faced with a passage of Scripture, what kind of questions can we ask? We can at least ask the following:

What is special about this passage of Scripture?

What is uncommon about it? What are its special features?

Why must it be said? What if it had not been said?

Why was it said like this, and not like that?

How would I have said it? Why doesn't the Bible say it as I would? People often say meaningless things. But with the Bible it is different. Whether the Bible says much or not so much, little is said by accident. Things in the Bible are mostly said with a purpose. But we can't always know the purpose at a glance. It is not by accident that the Bible speaks of certain things. Nor is it always accidental that it does not speak about other things. And if the Bible speaks of certain matters in this manner rather than that, very probably this is no accident either.

If we really hunger and thirst for righteousness we must conscientiously ask questions. Then we would be cooperating with the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit would consider us worthy of being taught.

Let us take the parable of the Prodigal Son as an example. (Lk. 15: 11-32) Many Christians feel that this passage of Scripture is already too familiar; nothing new can be gained by studying it again. But are we really all that familiar with this passage? Let us ask a few questions.

The Younger Son

“The younger son said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of property that falls to me.’” (v. 12) What does this verse of the Bible tell us?

From this passage of Scripture we can see that the younger son actually felt that there were some things that he deserved. He did not realize that he owned nothing in his father’s presence. He felt that he had a kind of right to ask his father for this or that. This was really a very serious mistake.

We should understand that we do not have any deserved inheritance. The only thing that we deserve is God’s reproach.

How many times have we Christians felt that there were some things which we deserved to receive from God because we have gone to church, said our prayers, read the Bible, and sacrificed some money and time for church business? This is really pitiable thinking. “When you have done all that is commanded you, say ‘we are unworthy servants, we have only done what was our duty.’” (Lk. 17:10)

After the younger son left his father, he became “wantonly dissolute.” (v. 13) He seems to be really free. He could do whatever he wished and sin to his heart’s content.

But is this really freedom? Is it really freedom to do whatever one wishes, or to commit any kind of sin one wants to? This is certainly not freedom. It is to become a slave of sin.

Who are the really free persons? Only those who in the face of temptation are able to overcome evil and not commit sin are really free.

No matter whether we are talking about individuals or families, the Church or the nation, discipline is necessary and is not to be taken lightly. How can being wantonly dissolute be called freedom? It is to be controlled by sin, to be the slave of sin.

Saint Augustine calls the restrictions which keep people from committing sin “blessed restraints.” This is the function of discipline. The younger brother did not want discipline. To him nothing was greater than freedom.

This is not Christian faith; it is outright individualism. The New Testament mentions freedom many times, but always in connection with knowing the truth and struggling against sin.

The younger son met many difficulties. Coming to himself, he thought about the happiness of his father's house, and said, "I perish here with hunger." (v. 17) Why does the Bible record this sentence? How does it help us to better understand the younger son and, at the same time, to know ourselves better?

From this sentence we can see that the younger son now clearly recognizes the seriousness of his predicament. His condition is not "OK", "generally all right," nor "about the same as others." He is starving to death.

Do I, likewise, really recognize the condition of my soul when I come to God? My own poverty and hunger? If I do not comprehend my condition as in danger of imminent death from hunger, or if I consider myself to be "generally OK", will my repentance be heartfelt and deep?

The younger son "came to himself," (v. 17) and said, "I will arise," (v. 18), "and he arose." (v. 20) Here we have three steps: awakening, decision and action. How do these three phrases help us to better understand the younger son? What kind of impulse do they arouse in us?

"I will arise." He arose, and where did he go? Do I have this same resoluteness of will? If I were in his place, even though I got up, would I not think about first going some place else to try my luck?

"Give me." (v. 12) This was the request he made of his father when he was leaving home. "Treat me as one of your hired servants." (v. 19) This is the request he made of his father upon his return. Do not these two requests represent the two completely different attitudes we have before our Father? One kind of prayer asks the Father to give me this or give me that. I regard myself as the center of everything. God is merely an errand-boy, or a supplier. Another kind of prayer asks the Father to change me, to use me. The Father is the center of everything. I am an instrument, a servant.

Please observe that when the younger son left home, he felt that he had a deserved inheritance. Now that he has returned, he relies only on

the love of his father.

Now let us look at the older son.

The Older Son

The older son "was in the field." (v. 25) This tells us that he was not afraid of honest work. He is not the kind of person who just eats and doesn't work. He is not a bad guy.

"These many years I have served you." (v. 29) These words from the mouth of a son make us wonder: in the last analysis, does he still consider himself a son? Or has he unconsciously changed the father-son relationship into one of master and slave?

"I never disobeyed your command." (v. 29) How does this sentence help us to see the innermost thoughts of the older son? His self-flattery, for instance. Not to disobey the father's commands — is this the only thing he can do to satisfy the father's heart? Can such a son be considered to know his father's heart?

From this sentence, how does the Bible lay bare our own innermost thoughts? Is not our obedience often also only negative; that is, just not disobeying the father's commands?

It's a shame that many Christians have never asked: what does the Father want me to do? They just try not to do what he does not want them to do, thinking that to be a Christian means only something negative, that we must not do this or that. In this way, most of them become over-cautious little people before the Father. Don't we know that God wants us to be his active sons and daughters? God does not want us to meekly submit to his will but, instead, to positively and happily fulfill it. We must not just ask God to keep us from stealing, from killing or hating people, from telling lies or committing adultery. We should, in a positive manner, and with great courage, seek God's kingdom and justice.

How does the older son address his father? (Please count the six "you's"). Again, in his father's presence, how does he speak of his brother? ("This son of yours"). How much love is there in this person's heart? "You never gave me a kid." (v. 29) His real prayer is basically: give me this, give me that. It seems that only his personality is a bit reserved. In the

past he was patient and silent. He did not open his mouth. Now he is angry, and so pours out the real words of his heart. What actually was the difference between him and his brother when the latter left home? Doesn't he, in his heart, also secretly feel that he has many "deserved things" that should come to him?

"That I might make merry with my friends." (v. 29) What does he consider to be merry-making, or happiness? Was living and working these many years with his father happiness? No, he only feels that this is a responsibility, a sacrifice, a burden. It is too drab. He feels that it is time for a change.

Now whether we are preachers or lay people, we should be like Mary: "My spirit rejoices in God my saviour." (Lk. 1:47) We should not use ideas such as "sacrifice," "suffering for Christ" or "carrying the cross," to explain our actions. Nor should we make an example of ourselves, pity and comfort ourselves, raise up ourselves or boast about ourselves, because of the suffering experienced during the ten years of turmoil, as if it were we who took care of God and not God's grace that took care of us. It is as if we have benefited God, so that we can now rely on ourselves, using the right we have earned to run away from God at least occasionally and seek happiness elsewhere! Consider what David says about God: "Thou art my Lord; I have no good apart from thee." (Ps. 16:2)

"..... with harlots" (v. 30) You the older brother did not leave home with your younger brother, and you have not seen him after he returned, so how do you know? Isn't your hatred so deep that you can very well forego evidence and immediately believe rumors and hurry to spread them? It is really like this: when we harbour hatred for other persons, we always think of their defects, as if they are worse than they are. How hard it is to believe that they can do good, and how easy to believe that they do evil!

Hearing about his younger brother, he immediately thinks he has sinned. And when he thinks of sin, he immediately thinks of prostitutes. Psychologists intent on "thought association" would no doubt tell us that this really reveals what the elder brother himself is usually thinking about.

Is not the Bible rebuking us here? We in the Church are too much like the older brother. This is true of the Church all around the world. We are

too arrogant. We hate the younger brothers. We are lacking in love for our fellow human beings. We are not pleased that they seek liberation from suffering and turn to the right path. Instead, we refuse to meet them, and are unwilling to recognize them as our brothers. We are even angry with our father and censure him. This kind of attitude is terrible. We are only kicking the younger brother out, or hindering him from returning to the father's house. In today's world many people do not believe in Christ and do not come to the Father, and one important reason is that our hearts are too much like that of the older brother.

The Father

Let us consider the father. Is he too lenient? What would I do if I were the father? Would I have agreed to divide the property and allowed the younger son to leave home? When the younger son returned home, how would I have treated him? When the older son became angry, how would I have treated him?

See how full of compassion the father was! Before the prodigal son had even arrived at the door, the father's whole body — eyes, heart, legs, hands, arms, lips — became active. (v. 20) He uses his whole body and soul to meet his child.

This is truly the heart of our heavenly Father. We can see this from the words "came to himself" which Jesus uses.

The younger son committed many sins and suffered much; then he "came to himself." (v. 17) To wake up or to come to oneself means "to become oneself again." We can see how sublime the human being is in the eyes of Jesus and of the Father. When one commits sin, one loses him or herself. But when one turns away from evil and comes back to the father's house, one returns to him or herself again and becomes a real person.

There are those who think that the human being is nothing other than a "sinning animal." They think that to sin is the essence of being human. They think that people live in sin like fish in water. In Jesus' eyes the term "sinning animal" is not suitable as a definition of the human being. When human beings sin it means that they lost themselves. We are only free when we turn away from sin. Then we really become human, just as a fish becomes itself again when it returns to the water.

Here we see what a lofty view of humanity Jesus has, how deep a trust he has in us. And from this we can see how concerned the heavenly Father is about human suffering. His love does not change even though we go far away from the Father's house. He hopes for our return. He believes that we will return.

Do we have the same concern for others? Are we only able to love those similar to ourselves — a few “older brothers”? And are we indifferent or apathetic towards the younger son?

Note that the younger son had originally prepared a few suitable words to say to his father when they met. But when he was actually face to face with his father, he could not get the prepared words out in time. When he saw his father's compassionate expression, these words became superfluous.

Now our God has prepared another older brother for humankind, “the first born among many brethren.” (Rom. 8:29) He does not regard his brothers or sisters as enemies. On the contrary, he has become a bridge for us to return to our Father's house. “Therefore he had to be made like his brethren in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make expiation for the sins of the people.” (Heb. 2:17)

Listen To The Tiny Voices

Our purpose was not to explain the parable of the “Prodigal Son,” but to illustrate that we should ask questions and listen to the tiny voices in the Bible.

The Bible itself is often clear. It is only because we have limitations that we do not hear clearly and the voices become indistinct.

The tiny voices are found throughout the Bible.

It was the most ordinary people, the shepherds, who heard the angels' glad tidings when the Savior was born, not those priests, scribes, theologians or religionists. The first ones to come to worship the holy infant were a few non-believers, foreigners who were representatives of other religions. God didn't arrange for any one other than these to be the first. All this embodies a message for us.

In reading the Four Gospels, have you ever paid attention to Jesus' hands? It is said that his hand or hands are mentioned sixty times, and always they speak to us in tiny voices.

We see the Lord's hands stroke a child and bless the people of the world. He places his hands on the heads or bodies of sick persons. At Nazareth he placed his hands on the book and opened it to the words of the prophet Isaiah, stopped there and read it to the gathering. Once, he used his hand to write words on the ground. He used his hands to pull Peter up. He also touched his disciples, during the Transfiguration on the mountain. His hand once held a whip to cleanse the temple. Again, they washed the disciples' feet. He used his hands to dip into the dish along with Judas; to break the bread; to lift the cup. On the cross, the nails pierced his hands and there poured out the redeeming and cleansing blood. After his resurrection, he again showed his hands to his disciples, saying, "Look at my hands", "touch my hands".

If we are to hear the tiny voices of the Bible, we must frequently ask: What is special about this passage of the Bible?

"Jesus wept." (Jn. 11:35) is the shortest verse in the Bible. But it reveals the Lord's most profound love. The four Gospels don't tell us "Jesus laughed," but they do tell us that Jesus wept. This then suggests that happiness and joy were more ordinary conditions for the Lord. This is why he compared himself with a bridegroom .

Let us also take Matthew, chapter 7 as an example. In this chapter, Jesus gives us so many things which are opposites as well as pairs.

the two gates	the narrow and the wide
the two ways	the hard and the easy
the two kinds of people	the few and the many
the two goals	eternal life or damnation
the two kinds of tree	the sound and the bad
the two kinds of fruit	the good and the evil
the two possible ends for the tree	to be preserved or cut down and thrown into the fire
the two kinds of foundation for	rock or sand

the house	
the two kinds of house builder	the wise and the foolish
the two results	one house stands firm while the other crumbles
two kinds of people who hear the word	those who hear the word and do it and those who hear but do not do it

The first chapter of Revelation tells us that John saw seven gold lampstands. These were seven churches and among the lampstands was one that resembled the Son of Man. This shows us: (1) there were seven lampstands, not just one; (2) the Lord was walking among the lampstands, he did not just circle one lampstand; (3) all seven lampstands were made of gold, not just one. On realizing these points, we can learn humility and mutual respect in matters of faith, not just accepting respect from others, but knowing how to respect others.

Comparisons

Comparisons are helpful if we want to hear the tiny voices. There are so many phrases, persons and events in the Bible which are contrasting pairs, such as Cain and Abel, Abraham and Lot, Saul and David, the Old Testament and the New Testament, Paul and James. The message of the Bible becomes clearer if we take the passages and study them and make comparisons.

Paul says: "Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel." (1 Cor. 9:16) On the other hand, the Lord Jesus says: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you traverse sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves." (Mt. 23:15) How should we connect these?

"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." (Jn. 6:68) These are the words of Peter. "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man. O Lord." (Lk. 5:8) These are also Peter's words. How should we join these two passages to enable us to know Peter more clearly and in this way to know ourselves more clearly?

"Our Father who art in heaven." This is the prayer which Christ taught us. **"The Lord is my shepherd."** This is the first verse of the 23rd Psalm. What is the distinction in the use of "my" and "our?" Who, after all, should be included in that "our" in the text of the Lord's Prayer?

"..... and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this, 'you shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" (Mk. 12:30-31) Since it says "with all", what further is there with which to love our neighbors as ourselves?

The careless think that the Bible is full of contradictions. But we have only to go to the Bible with humble, seeking hearts and God will certainly unravel his truth for us and let us see how rich, how just, how magnificent it is.

The Silences Of The Bible

We must listen to what the Bible says to us; we must also pay attention to what the Bible does not say to us. There are some things which the Bible does not say and there are good reasons for this.

In that famous painting entitled "The Light of the World," Jesus, holding a lamp in one hand, is knocking on the door of a house. There were those who noticed that there was no handle on the door and they raised this point with the artist. The artist said it wasn't that he had forgotten it but that he wanted to use this to tell us that Jesus is standing sorrowfully outside the house knocking on the door. But this door may only be opened from the inside, if the person inside is willing.

In the same way, there are some things which the Bible does not mention, but this is not due to God's forgetting them. In those things which are not mentioned there is also a message which he wants to tell us.

For example, how does the parable of the Prodigal Son end? Does the older brother finally listen to his father's exhortations and return home to make peace with his brother? Or does he continue in his arrogant behavior, remaining outside the house, unwilling to enter? No one knows. This parable ends suddenly just at the point where our interest is greatest. Why? Because we are that elder brother; whether we finally enter the

house or remain outside depends on us. The blank space after Luke 15:32 is for each of us to fill in.

In the entire Bible, there is one book which concludes with a question mark. This is the Book of Jonah. God asks Jonah a question but the Bible does not tell us Jonah's reply and the Book of Jonah ends here. And why is this? We must realize, this is not only a question God asked of Jonah. Even more so, he is asking it of us. And he is waiting eagerly for our answer.

The silences in the Bible are important. In its silences, there are also tiny voices speaking in our souls, exhorting us.

Of the sixty-six books in the Bible, there is one — the Book of Esther — which does not once mention God, from beginning to end. What is this particular silence telling us?

Esther is a young woman who accomplished a very wise and courageous thing for the well-being of her people. The book makes clear that God's hand is moving in the affairs of the world, even though God is never mentioned. God himself was glad about what Esther did for her people, and was willing to have this book among those in the Bible.

That the Bible has in it a book which doesn't even mention God, is clearly telling us that the things which God cares for far surpass what we term "religion". God does not place importance on mere words. Esther's courageous action, done out of passionate love for her country and people, is not outside God's care and providence.

Therefore, we can say that while whatever is written in the Bible is naturally important, there is also a message in whatever silences the Bible keeps.

Biblical silence has yet another important function. It is like a red light, telling us that we should go no further.

Someone once asked Jesus: "Lord, will those who are saved be few?" (Lk. 13:23) Jesus answered neither "many" nor "few". He said, "Strive to enter by the narrow gate." Peter asked, "Lord, what about this man?" (Jn. 21:21) Jesus didn't answer this either. He just said, "What is that to you? Follow me!"

The disciples begged Jesus to tell them about the day when he would come again (Mt. 24:3) but Jesus said to them: "But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the son, but the Father only." (v. 36). Later the disciples again asked, "Will you at this time restore the Kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6) Still, Jesus said, "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and be my witnesses." We can see that Christ does not want us to probe deeply into certain questions. When we do ask these questions he answers us with silence, at the same time reminding us to take care of our own responsibilities, to do our present tasks. The Bible tells us, "the secret things belong to the Lord our God; but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law." (Deut 29:29) It is obvious that, as human beings, we must recognize that there are some things which we have to be agnostic about.

The conclusion of the Gospel of John says, "But there are also many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written." Fortunately the Bible was not written to satisfy our curiosity, but to allow those who hunger and thirst for righteousness to know Jesus and to seek to become holy. The Bible offers us sufficient and clear guidance for this goal. We really have no reason to desire more.

What, then, is the truth which the Lord wants us to enter into, and what are the things he does not want us to probe?

Whatever God is willing to reveal to us — the truth which he wants us to enter into — is whatever can help us to become better children of God. Whatever will not aid us in becoming better children of God is, then, not the Biblical truth which God wants us to enter into. In his prayer to the Father, Jesus says: "Sanctify them in the truth; thy word is truth." (Jn. 17:17)

Sadly, there are times when we are not willing to follow the Spirit humbly, when we are not willing to respect the silences of the Spirit, but, stiff-necked, insist on knowing those things that God does not yet want us to know. Some take human ways of reckoning and presumptuous understanding to be Biblical truth and pass them on to others. They even use them to build themselves up to the point of attacking those loyal, humble

souls who do not dare to be wildly arrogant. This is extremely dangerous.

Let The Whole Bible Speak

Then the *chief priests* and the elders of the people gathered in the palace of the high priest, who was called Caiaphas, and took counsel written thus; how is it written in other parts of the Bible?

We often have the following experience. A passage of the Bible looks quite ordinary, but when we relate it with another passage and compare them, allowing each to expand upon the other, their unusual characteristics leap out at us.

The Acts of the Apostles tells us that Barnabas was a "good man." (11:24) Isn't it too prosaic to merely say that he was a "good man"? If, however, we go and read other passages concerning Barnabas (4:36-37. 9:26-27, 11:19-26, 15:39), Barnabas suddenly stands before us a living man. What makes him good? He is able to comfort others and help them. He loves the Church and gives all his belongings to it. He believes in people and trusts them. It is only due to his trust in the young Mark that Mark is able to return to the Church's work. He is good-natured. When he sees the Spirit in the actions of one who does not believe in Jesus, he is not jealous, but joyful. Furthermore, he is courageous and has insight. While others still fear Paul and are suspicious of him, he is the first to go to Tarsus to find Paul and take him to Antioch. And it is there that the term Christian came into use.

Who was it in the Jewish nation at the time who determined to hang Jesus on the cross? Some who have not carefully read the Four Gospels would answer sweepingly that it was the Jewish people. What they remember is just some people shouting "crucify him" and that this slogan appears in the Bible. (Mt. 27:23) This kind of generalization has given religious sanction to racial discrimination. The criminal massacre of the Jews could falsely be termed Christian and thus sacralized.

If we read the entire Four Gospels carefully, we can't help but see that those who sent Jesus to his death were none other than priests, Pharisees, scribes, elders and other influential personages. Jesus himself had predicted that "the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes and be killed." (Lk.

9:22) As for the general masses of the Jewish nation, they were like sheep without a shepherd. They didn't know Jesus to be the Christ, but between them and Jesus there was no enmity. They were quite sympathetic to him, to the point of taking care of him.

Take a look at the following Biblical passages:

"And he was teaching daily in the temple. *The chief priests and the scribes and the principle men* of the people sought to destroy him; but they did not find anything they could do, for *all the people hung on his words.*" (Lk. 19:47-48)

Then the *chief priests* and the *elders* of the people gathered in the palace of the high priest, who was called Caiaphas, and took counsel together in order to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him. But they said, "Not during the feast, *lest there be a tumult among the people.*" (Mt. 26:3-5)

"*The chief priests and the Pharisees* tried to arrest him, but they feared *the multitudes, because they held him to be a prophet.*" (Mt. 21 45-46)

Yes, during the interrogation, some in the crowd shouted "Let him be crucified." (Mt. 27:23) But the passage preceding this one tells us, "Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the people to ask for Barnabas and destroy Jesus." (Mt. 27:20) This is enough to show us that those who raised a hue and cry were not really the common people, but were bad types who had arranged beforehand to make an empty show of strength. As for the common people, up to the time when Jesus shouldered the heavy cross to Golgotha, they risked danger to be at his side. The Bible says, "And there followed him a great multitude of the people, and of women who bewailed and lamented him." (Lk. 23:27) Yes, at that time, the common people's intelligence and sight were clouded and as a result, they didn't recognize Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God. But we shouldn't group them together with the priests, scribes and elders.

If we want to understand the Bible, we must realize that Jesus Christ is most sympathetic to the common people. Before he was born, his mother predicted: "He (God) has shown strength with his arm, he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, he has put down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of low degree; he has

filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away." (Lk. 1:51-5) When he began his public ministry, he announced, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." (Lk. 4:18-19) We can see that the Lord Jesus was deeply concerned for the lot and fate of the masses, he believed they should attain liberation. Because of this, "..... the great throng heard him gladly." (Mk. 12:37) Since our Liberation, many Christians in reading these texts have felt particularly moved.

To allow the entire Bible to speak to us — this is a great principle of Bible reading. To isolate one or several verses of the Bible and neither listen to nor question what is said in other parts of the Bible — this is to quote out of context. We are then unable to uncover the true meaning of the Bible, and we substitute human meaning for divine meaning.

"Half a truth is the enemy of truth." It is dangerous to ignore the wholeness of Biblical truth by isolating one or several verses. Heresies are often caused by this mistake. There is a Western proverb which says: "All that glitters is not gold." We can add: "Not everyone who quotes from the Bible speaks the truth." How cleverly the devil quoted from the Bible when he was tempting Jesus. He could say: "It is written in the scriptures." But Jesus told him: "It is also written" To guard against errors we must look at the Bible as a multi-faceted book and look at its message in its totality. It is necessary that we resort to the message of the entire Bible in explaining specific verses. Jesus has given us a good model in this regard. Someone asked him what commandment was first in importance. He quoted two passages on loving God and loving one's neighbor from Numbers and Leviticus and said, "On these commandments depend all the law and the prophets." (Mt. 22:34-40) We can see that Jesus had probed deeply into the essence of the Old Testament; he had seen its total meaning. Therefore, although the Old Testament contains such a multitude of things, he was able to draw out general principles. If we only take the small things into consideration when reading the Bible, then we lose sight of the whole. This is neglecting the essence while attending to trifles.

If we are to allow the whole Bible to speak to us, we must observe the principle of giving equal weight to both New and Old Testaments. We

cannot emphasize one at the expense of the other. There are those who feel that to read the Old Testament is too backward for our time, but they don't realize the truth of what St. Augustine said, "The New Testament is hidden in the Old, and the Old Testament is completed in the New." The two testaments illumine each other; they can no more be separated than can the palm and back of the hand.

There are also those who feel the four Gospels are too superficial and that you can get somewhere only by reading the Epistles. This is also a mistake. Each and every portion of the entire Bible is mutually fulfilling and illuminating.

At both the beginning (Gen. 4:2, 12:32) and the end (Rev. 22:18-19) of the Bible, we are told not to set ourselves as authorities to add anything nor to take anything away. That is to say, we should emphasize what the Bible emphasizes and give little attention to that to which the Bible gives little attention. We should not add what isn't there. In this way, we allow the whole Bible to speak to us.

Let The Biblical Personalities Come Alive

There are many personalities in the Bible. The ones who are talked about at greater length are people of outstanding personality. In order to see how different characters stand out, we only need to put the related passages together and read them.

Let us take Jacob as an example, beginning from Genesis, chapter 25.

We know that Jacob was the grandson of Abraham. God chose Abraham from among the people of all nations and gave him and his children special care, guidance, trial and blessing. For in accordance with God's own economy, Christ the Savior, that is, the horn of salvation, would emerge from the descendants of Abraham.

From childhood, Jacob was his mother's favorite. He was a man who only thought of himself and did many things which hurt other people. Among them there are three events which we are most familiar with. (1) When his elder brother Esau came home from the fields famished, he took the opportunity to trade him some pottage of lentils for his

birthright. (2) When his father was old and his eyes were dim, Jacob disguised himself as Esau and deceived his father for the blessing which ought to be given to the first son. (3) His father-in-law was selfish and scheming, but Jacob out-witted him, so that in the end his flock was much stronger and larger than that of his father-in-law.

Jacob was unabashedly selfish. He was good at getting personal advantages, good at advancing himself. He played petty tricks to hoard up good things for himself. He made other people suffer losses and he did it splendidly.

Relying on his own cleverness and tricks, Jacob seemed to have solved a lot of problems for himself for twenty years. Generally speaking, he got along very well, though he also suffered to a certain extent. His twenty years of life in exile were "successful" at least to himself. He said: "For with only my staff I crossed this Jordan and now I have become two companies." (Gen. 32:10)

We remember that when Abraham was called, God told him: "And by you all the families of the earth will bless themselves." (Gen. 12:3) God called him, not in order to bless him or his tribe only, but to make him into a bridge of blessing, a vessel which would convey happiness, so that all humankind might have the gracious love of God. This is something which Jacob should have known, for he was already fifteen years of age when Abraham died. Then his father Isaac received the same enjoiner. (Gen. 26:4) Even Jacob himself was reminded of it again. (Gen. 28:14) He should not have pretended, therefore, to know nothing about it. Yet when it was his turn to fulfil the commitment, he no longer thought of other people. His only concern was about how to grab benefits for himself. Even in his dream at Bethel where God showed him the ladder to heaven and promised him the best things, his vow to God was still conditional and self-centered: "If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God, and this stone which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house, and of all that thou givest me I will give the tenth to thee." (Gen. 28:20-22) This is a bargain rather than a vow.

In the original language "Jacob" means "to overreach, to grab". This was exactly characteristic of the way in which he conducted himself. He

was born grabbing the heel of his twin brother. His outlook on life was "to grab". It was the principle according to which he dealt with other people.

In our society today there still remain people who think that one should go all out in life to grab whatever one can. Some of them may have more or less tricks than Jacob, some may have more or less favorable opportunities, but there is no difference in that they are all after personal fame and gain, or after position and power, in fact, anything that they can grab. They even proclaim: "Everyone for himself and the devil take the hindmost." In that way, they do Jacob one better. People even dare to drag this kind of outlook into the church, so much so that no matter whether it is in the pursuit of spiritual maturity or in Church work, they always set out to grab as much as they can for themselves. This is of course a most deplorable and miserable situation. There is a story about a certain Christian in a certain place who did not understand the meaning of the Lord's Supper, but who did know that it was a blessing to receive it. He insisted, therefore, on getting plenty of the consecrated elements for himself, as if it were some kind of loot. How can such a thing still be called the Lord's Supper?

Jacob had been out of his native country for twenty years. Then he set out for home. The next day he would meet Esau. What would his brother's attitude be? Would Esau treat him as a younger brother? Or as an enemy? Jacob could not know in advance. Later he found out that Esau was coming to meet him with four hundred men. What should Jacob do? But he was the same old astute Jacob. He divided his people, flocks, herds and camels into two companies as a precaution. Thus, if Esau came to one company and destroyed it, the other would escape. Moreover, in order to appease Esau, he sent several advance parties, all with presents. From all this, we know that Jacob had really given a lot of thought to the matter. Then, only after all these arrangements, he prayed: "Deliver me from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I fear him, lest he will come and smite me." He did not show the least sign of regret for the wrong he did twenty years ago against God and against Esau. Those twenty years were a career full of intrigue. He had come to a point where he could not even figure out whether his own brother would remain a brother or be an enemy. Was this the kind of life God wanted him to lead? Should this be the situation for God's own chosen people? What

pleases God and what God gives is goodness. But where is Jacob's goodness?

Jacob sent all his people and flocks and herds in front of him. He was left behind alone. This did him good. He could now face God alone. And at that moment he had a most peculiar experience. The description in the Bible is very brief and simple. Yet it has profound implications which are beyond my ability to fully develop.

The Problem Of Order: Penuel And Bethel

Twenty years before, not long after Jacob left his native land, he had a special experience at Bethel. There he saw in a dream a ladder set up on earth and reaching to heaven at the top; the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. (Gen. 28:10-17)

We understand that Bethel symbolizes the sweetest fellowship with God, closeness to God without barriers. One's spiritual experience seems to have reached its climax there. That place is "none other than the house of God, the gate of heaven." True, Bethel is warm, it is even burning hot.

But after twenty years, Jacob went through a Penuel experience. What he encountered there was not pleasant acceptance by God, but conflict, struggle and wrestling with God.

Bethel came first, Penuel followed. What kind of logic is this? Before God, should we not first go through the Penuel experience which deals with our sins, then cross the Jordan river to Bethel where we enjoy the divine presence and love for ever? According to our "common sense", should not God let us taste bitterness first and then sweetness? Why then first sweetness and then bitterness? This is a question which was raised some years back by our students at the Nanking Union Seminary.

I do not think we should begin from our own feelings. To seek logic from our feeling is unreliable. No doubt the Bethel experience and its results were good. Yet in that time and at that place, Jacob had still many hidden sins which he had not realized, confessed and dealt with. God did not demand that he solve those problems immediately. But neither did he forget them for ever. Sin, after all, is sin. It will not disappear of itself because we do not recognize it for the moment. After twenty years, two

hundred years, two thousand years, people come to see more clearly that something which has been taken for granted for a long time is nevertheless sin in the eyes of God, and in fact a serious sin which needs to be dealt with. It is not a question of what is bitter or what is sweet but is, instead, a question of partaking in the divine nature, of coming nearer to God's mind, and of working more adequately with the Creator God.

Many of us Christians like Bethel, but not Penuel. We like God to praise us, but are not happy to confront a God who comes to wrestle with us and to damage our self-assurance and self-conceit. As a result, questions as to good and evil, right and wrong, the mighty work of God and the manifestation of human sin, are all to be decided by the inveterate nature of Jacob in our hearts. This is bound to be misleading.

Yet our Bible tells us not only how Paul went to spend some quiet time in Arabia, but also how God wrestled with his beloved Peter on a housetop at Joppa. (Acts. 10) Even Jesus experienced both the transfiguration on a high mountain, as well as the agony in Gethsemane, where his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down upon the ground while he was earnestly praying.

We have seen that Bethel was certainly good, but it did not quite change Jacob. Only Penuel really changed him. From then on, his name was called Jacob no more, but Israel, one who had wrestled with God.

Now, let our churches and fellowship meetings be our Bethel. We wish to see the ladder to heaven and God's angels ascending and descending to bring us our food from above. But neither can we avoid Penuel. For no matter what, we must bear in mind that the one who wrestles with us is none other than God himself, who will never hurt us. It might be possible for us to lock up the gate and separate ourselves from the outside world to seek whole-heartedly the sweet 'life on the mountain'. But what can we gain if we do that? No true Christian can afford to live by burying his or her head in the sand. An honest, truth-seeking Christian is never afraid of the wrestling which he or she is bound to encounter in his or her thinking on the way to spiritual maturity, because this is normal. Only after having wrestled, do we come to know God, the truth and ourselves more clearly. Without the encounter at Penuel, we are still Jacobs and we cannot really understand Bethel.

Praying Is Also Wrestling With God

I do not know whether you will agree with me that genuine prayer is like wrestling with God.

A genuine prayer must meet the following conditions: (1) We must be certain that what we pray for is consistent with the nature of God. (2) We must pray by virtue of the right given to us in Christ. (3) We must boldly grasp God, plead with him and never let him go, even if it borders on rudeness in human eyes.

Job said: "Oh, that I know where I might find him, that I might come even to his seat! I would lay my case before him and fill my mouth with arguments Would he contend with me in the greatness of his power? No; he would give heed to me. There an upright man could reason with him" (Job 23:3-7)

So Abraham prayed for Sodom: "Wilt thou indeed destroy the righteous with the wicked? Far be it from thee to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from thee! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Gen. 18: 22-25) In this way he grasped the nature of God, knowing that he must do right, hate what is evil and love what is good. He pleaded with him and did not let him go easily. This is the prayer of faith.

The Canaanite woman also beseeched Jesus in the same way. Despite the fact that Jesus had refused her, she kept on begging: "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." (Mt. 15:21-28) She did not let go. She did not easily give up her chance to wrestle. Instead, she grasped firmly the nature of the Christ, that he is full of mercy and love, and so she boldly contended with him. This is the prayer of faith. If we know that what we pray for is consistent with God's nature, then we must not be afraid that what we pray may be wrong. We must be bold in asking. Such prayers will have the guidance of the Holy Spirit who will help us to get the blessing from God's hand. Such prayers are pleasing to God, so that we may even take the liberty to thank him before he answers our prayer, just as Jesus had lifted up his eyes and said: "Father, I thank you that you have heard me," (Jn. 11:41) while Lazarus was still lying in his grave.

It is important that we be certain that what we pray for is consistent

with God's nature. For this, we must first "become partakers of the divine nature" (II Pet. 1:4) ourselves.

Often we encounter another kind of prayer which may also be very earnest. Yet it does not come from the divine nature but from our human nature. Did not the mother of John and James ask Jesus to let her two sons sit at his sides, one on the right and the other on the left? This prayer is for the ego, for one's own gain. It is like the prayer offered by Jacob before Penue! It is a "grabbing" prayer, like the vow Jacob made at Bethel.

Some may ask: Since God is almighty, why did he not overcome Jacob and knock him down? Why should the Bible even say: "God saw that he did not prevail against Jacob"?

True, God is almighty. In terms of sheer strength, ten Jacobs in the presence of the almighty God would be helpless. But God wanted to wrestle with Jacob. During those twenty years, God restricted his own omnipotence, put aside for the time being his almightiness, in order that Jacob might come to understand this almightiness and become a new breed of man, one who works consciously and willingly with God. For what God wishes to create in the end are not machines that know only to obey orders, but a new kind of conscious co-worker.

God is almighty, yet he willingly lets his almightiness be prevailed upon by our faith and prayers. This is completely due to his deep love for us, his respect for our free will. If this were not so, he would be destroying his own work of creation.

What counts is that God must touch the hollow of our thigh. For every one of us, the hollow of the thigh is such a point on the body that it is only when it is touched by God that we become humble. Only then are we no longer self-assured and self-conceited, only then is our strength no longer manipulated by a grabbing will like Jacob's, only then do we not wander in vain, but return to God, as streams joining the vast ocean and turned into magnificent billows.

The hollow of the thigh is the point which leads us most easily into self-complacency. It is also the point over which we are most easily defeated. In Jacob's case, it was his petty tricks, because he had so many.

For Absalom, it was the vanity symbolized by his handsome hair which had a nation-wide reputation. He had not let God touch his hair, and that was why in the end it brought him to the tragedy of death. (II Sam. 18:9)

The hand of God will touch the hollow of our thighs, but it is a healing hand. It certainly will not smite us more than what God thinks necessary. It certainly will not break and crush us. Yet we have to receive some blows from God, within limits, in order that through this kind of breaking and crushing we bear on our bodies not only our own weaknesses, but also God's power. Paul, for example, had a mark of Jesus on his body, i.e., a thorn given in his flesh, in order that he "will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me." (II Cor. 12:9)

Let us note that Jacob's experience at Bethel took place after sunset: "The Sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in the place to sleep." (Gen. 28:11) Twenty years later, after he had wrestled with God, it was dawn: "The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his thigh." (Gen. 32:31) Penuel does not symbolize permanent suffering, nor permanent darkness; it leads us into the brightness of God's face and the joy of daylight.

We Should Ask: Has God Blessed Us?

Jacob made two requests in the course of his wrestling: he asked that his opponent bless him, and he asked that he reveal his name. God agreed to the first request, and blessed him. But God did not agree to the second request, answering, "Why is it that you ask my name?"

If indeed God had told Jacob his name, whether it was Yahweh, Elohim or some other name, it would become for people nothing more than an empty formula. If people become too interested in the question of the name of God, and if the spiritual experience of wrestling with God grows dim, then the blessing which has been received from God would be forgotten. It could even lead to factional strife over which name is correct. Would this not be putting the trivial above what is important?

Our God is the God who gives blessings, and no one can prescribe the object and scope of his blessings. This is what is important. In addressing him — whether as *shen*, *zhu*, *shangdi* or *shangzhu* — all forms are permitted,

because your *shangdi* is my *shen*, my *shen* is your *shangdi*. This is the one Lord whom we all serve.* The fact is that there are believers with different traditions in our Church. But the important thing is that we have only one God who gives blessings, the one God who blesses all. We need not ask if this person belongs to Paul's party or to that of Cephas, or if he or she belongs to the party of Apollo. We need only ask: Has God actually given his blessing? In our Church, there are no differences in our basic faith. However, there are some differences over certain viewpoints, rituals and terminology. We certainly do not regard them as something negative. We consider it a testimony to how richly God has blessed the mass of believers. But these differences are secondary. What is truly important is this: Here is your Bethel, the house of God; here too is your Penuel, the place where you can see the face of God. This is good enough.

Besides Jacob, there are many other persons in the Bible. We must get to know them better and, through our knowledge of them, come to learn what God has in store for us.

The Problem Of Purpose And Results

When approaching a Biblical passage, there are three questions regarding purpose and results which should not be overlooked:

(1) In the Biblical context, what was the purpose of this passage? What results did it produce?

(2) In our context, what is God's purpose and what are the results he anticipates in relating this passage to us?

(3) In our context, in quoting this passage, what am I pointing to? What is my purpose? What results do I anticipate?

The first question is the so-called question of background. It is very helpful to be able to know the background, but we may not be able to know it all. We must then learn whatever we can, and avoid far-fetched conjectures.

**shen*, *zhu*, *shangdi* and *shangzhu* are different words for God in Chinese. This paragraph refers to a long standing dispute over how the name of God should be rendered in Chinese.

The second question is more important. We do not just read the Bible for what it says to other people. The Bible must first of all become a letter with my name on it which I myself receive from God each day. It is I who personally receive it, open it and read it. Moreover, it is only because I regularly receive it, open it and read it that I am truly able to tell others about it.

The third question is also extremely important. As human beings we have limitations. Our motives are often impure. It is certainly worthwhile to examine before God our motives for speaking, our purpose and the anticipated results.

Let us take Paul's statement in Galatians 1:10 as an example: "Am I trying to please men?"

(1) In the Biblical context, what was the purpose of this passage? What results did it produce?

If we look at the context, we will see that some outsiders came to the Galatian Church, perverted the Gospel and troubled the Christians. (1:7) If Paul had wanted to placate these outside preachers, that is, if he had wanted to "seek the favors of men" or to "please men" (vs. 10), he could easily have put the question aside, or could even have gone along with them. But he wanted to "seek the favor of God" and not to "please men". (vs. 10) So he straight-forwardly cursed these men (1:9), and wrote the epistle to refute their wrong ideas.

It is obvious that in using the term "men" Paul was not referring to ordinary persons, even less to "the people" whom we speak about today. He was referring instead to some trouble-makers within the Church, those who distorted the gospel and had a bad influence on the people of the Church.

(2) In our context, what is God's purpose and what are the results he anticipates in relating this passage to us?

The message which God wants to give through this Biblical passage will certainly be interpreted differently by different people. Some may see that they should increasingly fortify the faith and the morals of believers. They should not trouble them, but, in fear and trembling, should guarantee that they themselves will not pervert the Gospel. There will be others who

see that they should follow the example of Paul's firmness. Whenever people are discovered to be destroying the purity of the gospel and making trouble for the Church, even if it is good to make a good impression on these people, the Christian should stand firm. Paul would not wish to please these men, but would strongly rebuke them. What firmness, to be able to disregard one's own interests for the sake of the purity of the Church!

(3) In our context, in referring to this statement of Paul's, what is my purpose? What results do I anticipate?

If we consider the meanings introduced above as the central message which should be spoken to Christians, then this would certainly correspond to the original intention of the text.

But there have been people who have taken this Biblical passage out of context. They arbitrarily take the word "men" to mean "the people", so that we Christians are encouraged to set ourselves against the people. That is, the more we cause the people to dislike us, the more we would glorify God. This is a distortion of Paul's original intention. Does the Bible require Christians to be set against the people? Certainly not.

Paul not only exhorts us to love one another, but wants us also to love all people. (I Thes. 3:12) He says, "..... but always seek to do good to one another *and to all*." (I Thes. 5:15)

Paul says of himself, "..... I try to please *all men* in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved." (I Cor. 10:33) He also says, "If possible, so long as it depends upon you, live peacefully with *all*." (Rom. 12:18)

The Church in Acts was like this: "And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their houses, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and *having favor with all the people*. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved." (Acts. 2:46-47)

It was obviously the original teaching of the Bible that Christians should not have feelings of animosity, condescension or arrogance towards ordinary people. It is only if we do not harbor such feelings that people will be willing to listen to the gospel which we have to preach.

If others coerce us because of our faith, we should not be afraid, but must maintain our faith, for only in this way will we be able to stand firm. But God does not wish us to go out to provoke others, or to incur unnecessary difficulties, for if we do this, we would not be able to truly glorify God. Such an attitude is not one of firmness in faith, but rather, at the very least, stubbornness.

It is the task of our colleagues in preaching to explain the Bible to the people. But as we see from the above-mentioned examples, we must remember continually to examine ourselves, so that we do not allow impure thoughts, motives or purposes to influence our view and interpretation of the Bible. We should ask ourselves: Does the purpose and objective result of our speaking serve to build up faith or to obstruct faith?

Justification By Faith

Let us take another example: justification by faith.

(1) What was the purpose of Paul and of Martin Luther in stressing justification by faith? What results did it produce?

In stressing justification by faith, Paul was opposing the observance of laws, rituals, circumcision and other practices as the criterion of righteousness. He pointed out that Christ's one-time sacrifice had already reconciled God and humankind. It is not behavior in accordance with the Law, but only faith in the grace of Jesus Christ which justifies us.

Justification by faith broke through the ethnic narrowness of Judaism, allowing the religion of one nation to develop into a world religion. It thereby created the possibility for Jesus Christ to be accepted as Savior of all humankind. This was a significant turn in humankind's religious history which exerted great influence in the course of our history.

Martin Luther again stressed justification by faith, emphasizing that because of the redemptive work of Christ on the cross, the separation of humanity from God had been overcome. Through faith, Christians could communicate with God directly, so that there was no need to have an hierarchical institution headed by a pope as the intermediary. This negated the domination of European feudalism on the religious scene, and thus encouraged democratic thinking and struggle for liberation.

(2) In our context, what does justification by faith mean for us? Justification by faith is an unchanging truth and a doctrine of the Christian Church. On the basis of this truth, we boldly come before the heavenly Father, communicating, praying and seeking guidance. According to this truth, everyone is equal before the heavenly Father.

Over the last thirty years, the Chinese Church has especially emphasized self-government, self-support and self-propagation. This "self" refers to the Chinese Christians ourselves. Justification by faith is the doctrinal point of departure for Chinese Christians' venture in independent initiative, doing church work and building up the Body of Christ by ourselves. Non-ordained lay Christians have become active everywhere. Their mutual pastoring is consistent with the doctrine of justification by faith which has opened up a great door for us.

(3) In our context, what is the correct purpose and good result of speaking of justification by faith? What would be an incorrect purpose and harmful result?

It is good, and the results would also be good, if we hold up Jesus Christ to explain that the human being is not able by him or herself to make up his or her short-comings before God. Only if we rely on the redemption of human beings through Jesus Christ will we be taken as righteous before God.

It is good, and the results would also be good, if we apply the doctrine of justification by faith to speak of the position of Christians before God, or the responsibility of Christians in the Church, or the way in which Christians should humbly live out the Gospel in the world.

However, if, in order to emphasize the principle of justification by faith, the wholeness and balance of all doctrines of the Christian Church are wiped away, then this exaggeration or deviation would inevitably lead to two unfortunate results:

(a) It would tell Christians to show contempt for the ordinary people, to set ourselves against them, playing up the fact that because the people don't believe in Christianity, none of their efforts and achievements are worthy of consideration. In this way, the doctrine of justification by faith would become an arrogant and preemptory excuse for Christians to negate the people's merits and achievements and to attack the cause of

the people. Now, outside of China, there are those who would want us to do this.

Justification by faith certainly does not mean that we must view those who do not believe in Christ as enemies. We Christians are also part of the people, we are only that part who have religious faith. We should humbly unite with the rest of the people and thank God for their contributions and noble qualities. As the Bible teaches us, all good things come from Lord: "Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren. Every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of light with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change." (Jas. 1:16-17)

"If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who does right is born of him." (I Jn. 2:29)

We obviously have no grounds to use differences of faith as an excuse to set ourselves against the people. We should open-mindedly follow the example of all those whose conduct is good and righteous so that our own behavior may improve.

The doctrine of justification by faith was not intended to make us Christians proud and arrogant, as if to say, "Because of our faith, our worth has increased a hundredfold." Would this not be domination by faith then? We ourselves have no cause to boast, for our justification is due entirely to God's mercy. The doctrine of justification by faith calls us not to usurp God's glory, but to be humble for the greater glorification of God.

(b) The second unfortunate result is that evil would be exonerated. We would regard a person as good merely because of his or her claim to be a Christian, thereby covering up his or her evil deeds.

This kind of justification by faith gives us Christians the special privilege of committing sins and doing evil. But what did Paul say about this? "Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means." (Rom. 6:1-2a) "Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means." (Rom. 6:15) "..... if we sin deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins." (Heb. 10:26)

It is certainly obvious that justification by faith should not become an excuse for covering up evil. Unfortunately, sometimes there are those who would want to use the doctrine of justification by faith to wipe the slate clean on a false prophet, even after he or she had been exposed for committing the most heinous crimes. This is extremely injurious to the holiness of the Church.

There has been a theory in the history of doctrine which claims that since our election as Christians was without regard to our actions, it doesn't matter how bad our works are, so that even Christians who commit the crime of subversion should not be brought to justice. Today, this viewpoint is already quite rare in our Church. But outside of China there are those who would again like to export this kind of viewpoint to us.

Our own justification comes indeed from faith, but the holiness and purity of our life and action are to be offered up as our testimony. One reason why so many people in the world today are unwilling or unable to believe in Christ is that individuals, groups and nations who claim to be Christian are so utterly incapable of making Christ manifest in their actions. The question of justification then sounds utterly irrelevant.

Study Some Theology

In our Church today, there are still people who unfortunately don't have a high opinion of theology. They view theology either as something harmful to faith or as a branch of secular learning which is not helpful for faith. We must reclaim theology's reputation.

If we think of the Bible as a beautiful painting, then theology is a clearly drawn map. Both of these are important.

What is theology? Theology is the summary and systemization of the spiritual insights which successive generations of Christians from many different cultural backgrounds have received from God. Its function is to guide us in our spiritual quest. If theology does not arise out of the experience of the Church, then it becomes inflexible dogma. But if experience neglects the guidance of theology, then it remains primitive and easily prone to subjectivist abuses. The purpose of theology is to direct our seeking along the right path so that we may not be led astray. It is the responsibility of theology to examine and protect the precious resources accumulated by the whole Church in past generations, and to guide the

lives of individual churches and Christians.

Could we as individual Christians be able to come up with the concept of the Trinity relying only on our own efforts? The answer is no. For this would have been impossible without the theologians in the early Church who brought together many diffuse and fragmentary concepts about God from the Old and New Testaments and from Christians' spiritual experiences, and developed them into the concept of Trinity. Or, would we truly understand how to pray relying only on our own prayers and Bible reading? Certainly not. For if theologians throughout two thousand years of Church history had not collected and summarized all sorts of diffuse and fragmentary teachings of the Bible on prayer, and inquired into all sorts of piecemeal and fragmentary experiences in the course of Christians' spiritual life, we would have no theology of prayer to help us, and our prayer would still be somewhat like primitive magic. Again, without the guidance of Church doctrines, how could we come to full and precise understanding of the whole Bible, avoiding all kinds of biases and heresies? Depending only upon our aimless wandering through the vast world of the Bible, how would we be able to bypass the pitfalls and arrive at the truth?

Therefore, it is worthwhile to study theology. It summarizes diffuse experiences and elevates them to the level of doctrine which can then be used to guide the spiritual life of believers. Christians need to read the Bible, but they should not therefore look down upon theology and doctrine. We should not study our theology apart from the Bible, and we should not study the Bible without the guidance of theology.

Those who oppose theology do not, in the first place, realize the benefits which they can derive from it. How do they in the second place, understand that they themselves are not without a theology. In fact, they likely have a good deal of theology, but it is only an unconscious and therefore probably confused theology.

Humility And Obedience

In studying the Bible God continually provides us with new light so that we can find our way along the road. Christ said, "I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now." (Jn. 16:12) "What I am doing you do not know now, but afterward you will understand."

(Jn. 13:7) "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth." (Jn. 16:13)

Because of this we have the right to hope that, through the Bible, we will each day enter more deeply into the truth and from the Bible, we will each day develop new insights and understanding.

At this point, the question is not the importance of a method or a technique. It is rather a question of obedience to the will of God, that of softening our hearts so that we may partake in the nature of God.

It has been said that a disposition obedient to God is better suited to opening up the mysteries of the Bible than a university education.

The Frenchman Pascal once wrote that, while in the case of ordinary knowledge, the more you understand the more deeply you love, with spiritual knowledge it is just the opposite: the more you love, the more deeply you will understand.

Jesus Christ himself said, "If any man's will is *to do his will, he shall know the teaching*" (Jn. 7:17) It is not to wait to know before you obey, but to obey so that you may know.

Some people sometimes feel the absence of any light in reading the Bible, and then say that the life of the Spirit has "dried up". But they should ask themselves, "Am I truly willing to see new light? Am I truly not afraid of new light? Would I really be prepared to follow and obey the light regardless of the costs?"

New light is by no means a subject for tea-time or after-dinner chit-chat. To receive the new light means a willingness to open yourself up in the light, to allow God to examine you and put you on trial. Bible study is not our examination of the Bible but the Bible's examination of us. Not everyone welcomes self-examination. But the true meaning of studying the Bible is nothing other than allowing God to put you on trial: "For the Word of God is living sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart." (Heb. 4:12)

The arrival of new light may not be pleasant, perhaps even more like an earthquake. It will point out that you should deal with those sins which

you haven't dealt with before. You may be required to abandon certain deeply held views, methods and ways of thinking. When that time comes, will you be humble and obedient before the new light? Or will you refuse to see it? This is the test.

In order to gain a vision of the new light, we must willingly and with determination allow it to lead us wherever it may. Those who fret about their own gains and losses are blind to God's illumination because deep down in their hearts they hold onto their old views. "..... They take their stand on visions, puffed up without reason" (Col. 2:19) Naturally, the spiritual life of these people cannot progress very far, but will wither and dry up.

When we speak of humility and obedience and seeking the guidance of God into more abundant truth, I hope you see that, today, there is a purpose in God's calling us to be Chinese Christians. We would be letting him down if we remain blind to this fact.

There are two special features of our Chinese Church: (1) In the past, we were situated in a semi-feudal, semi-colonial and extremely backward country. We were the Western nations' mission field, unable to be self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating. There were many aspects of our Church life which were foreign to the Chinese. (2) Today we are situated in an independent socialist country. The Chinese Church is the first Church in history to find itself bearing these two characteristics. God has a special purpose in placing us in this special position. He wants us to serve him not under the old written code, but under the new law of the Spirit. (Rom. 7:6)

Martin Luther put it this way:

"If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God except precisely that little point which the world and the devil are *at the moment* attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing him. Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is proved, and to be steady on all the battlefield besides is mere flight and disgrace if he flinches at that point."

As far as our Chinese Church is concerned, the crux of the matter is that today God has called us to be a Church which can nourish and cultivate itself. We must establish in China a self-governing Church which is

well-governed, a self-supporting Church which is well-supported, a self-propagating Church in which propagation is done very well. In order for Christians in China to build up the Body of Christ, we must model ourselves after the Church of the Apostolic age. We must obey the God who reveals Himself through the Bible. We must absorb the fine traditions and solemn lessons of Church history. And we must allow the Holy Spirit to show us a path appropriate for China which others have not walked before. We must dare to leave behind the insights gained by other nations, other ages and other Christians to allow our own spiritual experience to blossom forth, so that the wisdom and stature of Chinese Christians and the Chinese Church can grow together with the love of God and humanity. And this time, our central responsibility above all others is to cast off the colonial character of the Chinese Church so that it may truly become a Chinese Church with its own characteristic features. No Chinese Christian should abandon the struggle at this point, because to give up would be inviting the penetration of colonial forces. Although, in the short run, it would mean a lot of money and material, and there would be no end to high sounding words, yet, in the long run, we would not really be able to witness to Christ effectively. We have the lesson and experience of more than one hundred years of foreign Churches' missionary work in China and these should provide us with historical vision and guide us to avoid the old path.

Today, God has not wanted us to move backward but is leading us forward into a new realm. We especially need humility and obedience to follow the new light which God gives us.

Some Suggestions For Bible Study

Let us consider a few suggestions to help Christians read the Bible for spiritual enrichment. What do we need to give special attention to in Bible study? We should pay special attention to the following kinds of subjects and passages:

- (1) all Biblical subjects which are repeated many times, such as honesty, righteousness and compassion;
- (2) all subjects which we ourselves may not regard as being terribly important, such as thankfulness;

(3) passages where certain subjects are introduced in the Bible for the first time, such as the first mention of the Holy Spirit in Exodus 35:31;

(4) all sayings which are especially emphasized in the Bible, such as Jesus' words, "Truly I say unto you.....";

(5) all passages and persons in the Bible that have become paradigms or models, such as David, the model king; or Solomon, the model of wisdom; or Absalom, the model of vanity; or I Corinthians 13, the paradigm for love.

In order to facilitate our Bible reading, the names and order of the sixty-six books should be memorized. Some don't remember that the Old Testament has thirty-nine books and the New Testament twenty-seven. It is really not difficult to remember: $3 \times 9 = 27$ and $39 + 27 = 66$.

Manna must be gathered anew everyday, for by the second day, it is spoiled. The Bible must also be read everyday. Everyone will hopefully be able to cultivate the good discipline of setting aside a daily time for individual devotion.

It is not good to read through the Bible too quickly. It is meant to be read slowly and carefully. Just as it is not good to rush through your job, so it is not necessary to decide that you must read through the entire Bible each year or every other year. The important thing which must not be neglected is to allow the whole Bible to speak to us. If we sometimes read only one or two verses and wait patiently, God will provide enough spiritual food for us for that day.

Reading the Bible in the early morning is like receiving a letter which God has sent to his children. For such a letter it is not necessary to use outside reference books.

We might pay attention to the way in which the Bible is divided into sections according to their meaning. For example, Psalm 139 has twenty-four verses which may be divided into four sections with six verses each. The first section says that in searching the human heart, there is nothing which God does not know. The second section says that the all-knowing God who has discerned the human heart is also omnipresent; there is no place to escape from him. The third section says that instead of trying to hide from God, human beings should be obedient to Him who is the

source of all things. The fourth section says that the true meaning of obedience lies in our identification with God in all his love and hate. A section-by-section analysis will help us grasp the central meaning of a passage.

Some have asked how we may put aside rational thinking when reading the Bible. I do not think it is correct, nor is it possible, for normal people to stop thinking rationally. John Locke ridiculed that point-of-view when he said that if God's revelation is opposed to the use of reason, then we might as well say that, because of the invention of the telescope, we could pluck out our eyes. Paul made the point that we "will pray with the spirit, and will pray with the mind also; we will sing with the spirit and sing with the mind also." (I Cor. 14:15) He also taught that we should "weigh what is said". (vs. 29) He certainly did not speak favorably of those who "have a zeal for God which is not enlightened." (Rom. 10:2)

We must also remind ourselves that rational thought alone is not enough. When we approach the Word of God, we must pray and wait, we must beseech God and listen to him.

In short, the Bible is a precious resource which reveals itself to all who seek.

The Bible is one of the world's everlasting books. The progress of modern civilization by no means makes the eternal message of the Bible out of date. Scientists' discovery of electricity has made a great contribution to humanity, but no one would build a house without windows because of the electric supply. We cannot do without sunlight. The Bible also provides us with sunlight. Its message will never become dated, and its rays of truth will forever penetrate the darkest places.